3. Academic Activism in Higher Education: A Dialectic of Resistance and Surrender in a Time of Neoliberalism

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Abstract: The historical, cultural, political, and economic contexts of academic activism have been marked by the structural crises of capitalism, which, along with the emergence of neoliberalism, have sought to change the Academy and disciplines. The disciplinary impacts of neoliberal policies outside and within the academy have all influenced students, academics, and management in differing ways. Furthermore, academic activism in higher education requires a debate on the function of education, the role of the university along with disciplines, and exploration of the importance of ideology in relation to human emancipation or alienation. So too this debate should consider whether academia and activism occupy separate worlds in a discursive strategy.
to disqualify the legitimacy, cogency, or efficacy of academic activism. The economic and managerial consolidation of the neoliberal university has intensified the challenges of activism and resistance within academic disciplines as well as for individuals. This paper aims to explore the legacy of neoliberal change within academia, identifying the opportunities and need for activism within the Academy. Using an argumentative literature review supported by the critical reflection of the authors’ experiences within the academy in Brazil and the UK, we explore the contemporary challenge and the need to utilise the contradictions of the current system to work collaboratively and to be engaged as public intellectuals.

**Keywords:** academic collegiality, academic agency, neoliberalism, living knowledge

**Introduction**

As a group of international researchers committed to social justice, we responded to the call for a paper on academic activism, as our work on decolonisation and inequality frequently involved seeking to engage in the process of social change. Our community of practice debates and discussion often involved exploring activism as a form of agency, particularly as we felt that agency was an analytical thread that weaved its way through the variety of manifestations of activism. In this paper, we wish to continue the critical discussion and engage collegially with colleagues regarding the nature of activism within academia, before considering the forces shaping this engagement in the Academy, exploring activism through what we have identified as three critical, intersectional layers or prisms namely geopolitical, epistemological, and socioeconomic disadvantage. In doing this, we have used Academia to reflect the institution, whilst academia reflects the body of intellectuals.

**Defining Activism**

While we have used the term “academic activism” in our writing, our review of the academic literature highlights that this term is not well-defined or even utilised in peer-reviewed papers on the same topic. We noted that papers exploring activism often include consideration of seeking to shape change within society, address inequality through recognising socio-economic, political, and structural forces, along with an ambition to engage with activism,
outside of core academic employment requirements.\(^1\)\(^2\)\(^3\) Other literature appears to make greater use of the term “intellectual”, such as Stewart Hall who viewed this “as a practice which always thinks about its intervention in a world in which it would make some difference, in which it would have some effect”.\(^4\) We acknowledge that working within the Academy makes the pursuit of this form of intellectual work possible.

The integration of activism and academia is nuanced and interlinked with the role of academics, academic disciplines, the role of the Academy, and its respective contexts, including that of changes to funding and governance. Consequently, we were reminded that Marx and Engels\(^5\) viewed the importance of philosophy within academia, as being linked to the extent to which it could change the material conditions of the world. Debora de Castro Leal, Strohmayer and Krüger argue that “engaged, activist-learning research must have a specific understanding of knowledge, of what counts as knowledge and how it is produced”\(^6\) Epistemologically, the political and socio-cultural links to activism are grounded in scholarship within the Academy.\(^7\)

A university’s role in society is complex, providing teaching and research all of which interact to produce multiple useful benefits for society transcending economic, social, and cultural realms.\(^8\) University encourages students to engage with different cultures and identities, along with diverse norms

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and values\textsuperscript{9} enabling an ongoing process of continued review of self-identity, values, and culture.\textsuperscript{10, 11} Latin American public universities, in particular, have been viewed (see for instance, Torres\textsuperscript{12}) as having a key role in the shaping of critical neoliberal and postcolonial debates. Brazilian public universities, in particular, view their role as promoting social development; fostering extension projects and programmes; providing training and qualification courses; supporting social and environmental projects; articulating for and with the community; considering popular knowledge practices and guarantees of democratic values or equal rights; and finally respect for the person along with environmental and social sustainability.\textsuperscript{13} At first glance, neoliberal academic processes, for instance, research impact assessments, appear to support the notion of engaging and then measuring the impact of research beyond academia. However, critical discussion of Research Excellence Framework also highlights that this kind of impact assessments shape, or alternatively develop, new knowledge and the material conditions of society. However, the extent to which this aspiration is achievable in its widest sense, are subject to debate, as we will explore later in the paper.

In the United Kingdom, there are institutionalised constraints on academics in the neoliberal university, so there is a need to explore change in less obvious/subtle/subversive or visible ways.\textsuperscript{14, 15, 16} There is also the


\textsuperscript{12} Torres, 2019.


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notion of everyday resistance through subversion in the existing system. One of these ways is through using “research impact” as an opportunity for subverting the system, designing plans for social change, and working with non-academic actors beyond the research life cycle. Activism in the “everyday” of academic life takes on many forms in the modern context too. By cutting opportunities for protest-type activism and shrinking social and political spaces of deference, it might initially appear that agency of academics to protest or carry out activism is limited or has diminished. Nevertheless, the lens we use to see agency, in this paper, is multi-layered. These tools of activism can change from coercion to co-optation, rejection to mimicry, defeatism to axiorational negotiations of choice, and decisions about how we operate.

Drawing from Hobson and Seabrooke’s eIPE framework, agency is demonstrated in what researchers do when on fieldwork and how they implement research impact in their spheres of influence and pedagogic activism: through critical theory, methodology, and reflexivity. Roggero characterised this as the production of living knowledge; academics co-produce living knowledge through social knowing with students and in collaboration with peers and stakeholders. Winn, Hall, and Erskine argue that living knowledge should be commodified in socially useful ways. Changes in the structures of universities have problematised the agency of academics, specifically the false dichotomy between public and private advocacy. The shift to reflexive positionality, even the new uptake of decolonisation of curriculum by universities in the north can be co-opted by academics for genuine reflections,

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initiating knowledge sharing that leads to justice, for example, climate activism, artefacts from Africa, hidden genocides by colonialists, continuities of slave economic benefits in contemporary society, political and economic inequalities, critical race relations, and other intersectional injustices.

Hobson and Seabrooke support our lens for recognising agency and change, proposing that agency should be analysed by everyday actors interacting with elites and structures more frequently, with change conceived more critically along with the use of defiance, mimetic challenge, and axiorationality. Thus, change can be incremental rather than sudden and disruptive. They define everyday actions as “acts by those who are subordinate within a broader power relationship but, whether through negotiation, resistance or non-resistance, either incrementally or suddenly, shape, constitute and transform the political and economic environment around and beyond them.”

The nature and role of universities have shifted over time, shaped by state and economic policy drivers such as capitalism, and more specifically neoliberalism. Within this contemporary context of neoliberalism and the discourse of activism, authors such as Chouhy while exploring the role of social movements, have highlighted how supporters of neoliberal policy, seldom self-identify themselves, making the motives of those driving policy change difficult to identify. This complicates the challenge of considering the nature and intent of proposed and implemented reform, along with their underlying opaque motives. As a result, critics such as Hetland and Goodwin note that

25 Hobson and Seabrooke.
26 Hobson and Seabrooke, 2007, 15–16.
in academic papers related to social movements, discourse regarding capitalism or political economy has all but disappeared. Consequently, this raises questions about how and when neoliberalism or political economy are discussed and explored within the Academy, along with the need for a wider critical exploration of internationalisation and restrictions on academic agency. Collective academic work too has been hampered and de-prioritised through revised academic re-production processes. One example of this would be the socio-economic impact of academic life regulation and how this has impacted the space and opportunity for activism within the Academy.

The influence of market forces within universities has increased over the past three decades resulting in critics such as Giroux, highlighting the impact of corporatisation of higher education and its affirmation of capitalism as a predominant economic structure. Changes in the Academy must therefore be viewed in the context of wider societal transformation as being a result of neoliberalism (see, for instance, Yilmaz, Feiner and McKenzie), along with its reshaping by market forces. Nonetheless, neoliberalism within the Academy has promoted greater use of business practices, with funding changes resulting in greater importance being placed on research grants to widen revenue receipts, along with the promotion of student customers in an academic market. So too, Academic benchmarking through activities such as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the UK (see Henkel, Winter (now known as the Research Excellence Framework (REF)) provide useful information and market-related contexts for academic and research customers to facilitate the

34 Harvey, David, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
market. Market logic and its resulting discipline provide an overwhelming driver, marginalising other expressions of social or political well-being.

**Forces Shaping Activism**

The promotion of the knowledge economy\(^\text{39}  40\) has seen universities being considered a key driver within the global neoliberal learning society\(^\text{41}\). Globalisation has encouraged, even enabled, the growth of international campuses, internationalisation of the curriculum and facilitated global measures of academic success, that is, university rankings. Importantly the underlying theoretical assumption of neoliberalism is of the self-interested individual, a belief in the market, along with its ability to distribute resources appropriately, including those services which would normally fall within education\(^\text{42}  43\)\(^\text{44}\). Consequently, the implementation of neoliberal agendas seeks to underpin the commercialisation of academia but also increases its contradiction with the Academy’s traditional intellectual social obligations, commitments and its wider remit to provide institutional educational\(^\text{45}  46  47\). Consequently, authors such as Ball\(^\text{48}\) are critical of this altered educational culture with its focus on measurable outputs along with the consequent changes to the nature and

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purpose of education. This impact is seen as being at the level of structural and relational, as well as ethical and discursive. Quality assurance mechanisms in academic standards, which would include governance by numbers and academic output, all enable flexible academic management, but these impact how individual academics view and manage their careers. Authors such as O’Neill and Jolley caution that this academic environment may encourage academics to avoid accusations that they are pursuing their own professional vested interest, by reinforcing their individual focus and working to meet university performance requirements rather than engaging as intellectuals within the academy.

University sector structural change has reshaped the university’s role within the knowledge economy. Consequently, academic board roles have evolved from being overseers of research and teaching, along with symbols of management and academic collegiality, to contested spaces resulting from pressures to balance entrepreneurial activity and scholarship. Rhodes, Wright and Pullen, using Rancière’s division between “policing” (preserving foremost social relations and power distribution) and “politics” (stopping of police order in the name of equality), have proposed that processes such as research impact benchmarking have closely aligned to the former, thus maintaining the existing neoliberal order. Research impact benchmarking and assessment, therefore, limiting academic freedom rather than encouraging it, and while acknowledging the production of knowledge, evidenced through the metrics employed, the question remains for whom this knowledge is being created and how it will change society?

49 Ball, 2016, 1046–49.
50 Ball, 2016, 1054.
51 Sojot, 2018.
57 Rhodes et al., 2018.
Increased competition between academics, along with reduced opportunities for collaboration and collegiality\(^{58}\) promote alienation. Marx and Engels\(^{59}\) highlighted that alienation was a central aspect of capitalism and resulted in employees being separated from almost all aspects of their work, management, colleagues, and themselves. Within academia, intellectuals increasingly feel alienated from traditional Academy values such as collegiate self-governance, research metrics, and teaching due to the focus on student-customers. Consequently, this alienation contributes to the invisibility of scholar-activism.\(^{60}\) Others, (see for instance, Nørgård and Bengsten\(^{61}\)), highlight the growing demand for wider academic contributions to society, beyond which has traditionally been offered by universities. These demands alongside concerns of academic precarity, well-being and social justice,\(^{62}\) marketisation impact due to professionalisation, and reductions to student freedom, and criticality.\(^{63}\) Critics (see for instance, Nørgård and Bengsten,\(^{64}\) Dakka and Morini\(^{65}\) ) optimistically view this environment as stimulating embryonic bottom-up efforts to share understanding and experience of academic activism across institutions and globally. This analysis accords with\(^{66}\) views of these challenges as being a structural problem that requires collective responses to resolve.

The challenge to intellectual activism by community actors, who are organic collaborators, is another important driver shaping the academic

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\(^{61}\) Nørgård, and Bengsten, 2021.


\(^{64}\) Nørgård, and Bengtsen, 2021.


\(^{66}\) Pereira, Maria do Mar, “Struggling within and Beyond the Performative University: Articulating Activism and WORK in an ‘academia Without walls’,” in *Women’s Studies International Forum*, vol. 54 (Oxford: Pergamon, 2016), 100–10.
manifestation of activism in a neoliberal setting. Sometimes academic activism could be viewed as counterproductive, complicating the often-simple push for change by “wider” activists or when the role of “experts” has been denigrated. It is important to note academics may gain self-validation from intellectual activism, and so consequently can be viewed as elitist, particularly when communities perceive any aversion to challenging power due to self-interest. Consequently, academic intervention is not always embraced, unless grounded in community struggles, which go beyond intellectual purposes.

Academics contribute to theoretical and conceptual frameworks, which may help raise awareness of serious challenges at local and international levels, although this may alienate grass-root activists who may undertake their roles without the privileges and resources of the academy. Academics are then forced to engage in two-faced cuttlefish shape-shifting tactics, which seek to engage with “friends” in the activist struggle as well as on the other hand engage with “foes” in business and policymaking who are perceived to on the opposite side of the divide. Consequently, some obstacles may at times be opaque and the importance of critical examination and debate of these frameworks is to expose those that are rendered invisible through ideology.

Figure 1. Obstacles to Activism. Adapted from Flood, Martin and Dreher\textsuperscript{72}

\textbf{Spaces for Activism – Narrowing or Just Different?}

It is incontrovertible that structure shapes both the notion and enactment of activism, as do the meaning of words used in activist discourse and the way in which academia is governed. As a team, we have grappled with debates about whether there is a single conceptualisation of activism or whether there are multiple notions. We consider that it is important as public intellectuals for academic activism to extend beyond the description of what we see, to critically analyse meaning and epistemology and inspire others to critically explore their worlds too. Consequently, the space to engage with activism includes research,\textsuperscript{73} teaching and mentorship,\textsuperscript{74} policy development,\textsuperscript{75} and social

\textsuperscript{72} Flood, Martin, and Dreher, 2013, 17–26.
activism. Critics such as highlight academia’s struggle to make institutions more inclusive and that despite progress in this regard, they remain an environment of ongoing potential oppression. So too, limits to educational activism were evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, as efforts were made by the Academy to recover lost tuition fees, creating increased risk for students and academics as universities sought to stabilise their balance sheets.

Currently these converging forces appear, at one level, to have reduced the opportunity for protest-type activism, while the shrinking social and political spaces of Academy deference suggest that academic agency has been limited or diminished. However, what is unclear is the extent to which we simply need to adjust our lenses used to view agency, and whether activism, at least in part, continues but is now less visible in what was the traditional sense. So too have activism tools changed in some disciplines from coercion to co-optation, rejection to mimicry, defeatism to axiorational negotiations of choice and decisions about how the academic operates. We question whether activism exists on a continuum and is therefore differentially shaped dependent on context, discussion, and debate. While it is clear neoliberalism and the market have powerfully shaped academia, it is important to recognise that this also opens other spaces for intellectuals along with its contradictions. One such area worthy of consideration is whether intellectuals shaping the co-production and dissemination of knowledge can choose to shape their teaching from being overly descriptive and so supporting existing power relations, or whether their teaching can be enhanced to promote critical thought and debate?

78 Suzuki and Mayorga, 2014.
The Role of Higher Education Institutions

West\textsuperscript{82} considered activism as including the roles of the oppositional professional intellectual; the professional intellectual; critical communities of practice; or the critical organic catalyst. In contrast,\textsuperscript{83} acknowledged that activism in academia produced knowledge to enable an engagement with progressive change; provided a means to undertake research, engage in progressive teaching and learning; and continually challenging power relations. The role of higher education is therefore important due to its role in developing and disseminating new knowledge, thought, and judgement,\textsuperscript{84} although there is disagreement on its engagement with activism, along with the boundaries of any activism.\textsuperscript{85} Within Brazilian public universities, the University Council often includes members of social movements to support with decision-making and so shape the strategy of the Academy, for instance, the inclusion of small family farmers to exchange knowledge and ideas.

The Latin American University has therefore been pressured by social movements, which have demanded a much more comprehensive role beyond, which extended beyond the understanding of accumulated knowledge, training of professionals, and their research locus.\textsuperscript{86} The University has been called to look at real society and its demands. According to Traspadini,\textsuperscript{87} the true social function of universities requires the Academy to respond to the needs of its time, based on diverse societal demands, among them, those of the social movements of the countryside and the city. To be a popular university (or the University for the people) is essential for there to be a connection between intellectuals, from both formal education and genuine knowledge of traditional communities. Similarly, in Nigeria during the 1970s/1980s universities had a role in providing wider social outreach and engagement.\textsuperscript{88}

\textsuperscript{82} West, 2008.
\textsuperscript{83} Flood, Martin and Dreher, 2013.
\textsuperscript{84} Neary, Mike, “Beyond Teaching in Public: The University as a Form of Social Knowing,” Towards Teaching in Public: Reshaping the Modern University (2012):148–64.
\textsuperscript{85} Davids and Waghd, 2021.
\textsuperscript{87} Traspadini, R. P., “Como construir uma Universidade Popular”, Outras Palavras. Decolonizações, december 1, 2021. “How to Build a Popular University”.
\textsuperscript{88} Akinwunmi-Othman, Mohammed Nurudeen, “Political Activism in Nigeria: Historical Perspectives and Current Challenges,” in Globalization and Africa’s Transition to Constitutional Rule (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 5–76.
having been curtailed by military regimes, new forms of creative activism through art and media have become prevalent.\textsuperscript{89} \textsuperscript{90} Thus, social movements not only play a role in the formal curriculum but also supported the division of tasks, study, and political engagement in and outside the Academy and engaged with workers from different sectors of the economy.\textsuperscript{91}

However, within the neoliberal Academy, critics such as Weiner\textsuperscript{92} highlight the challenge of identity politics and sociologically differentiating between what might be considered individual problems and social issues. He argued that intellectual teachers are required to conform to market-based standards which require safe spaces and consumer “comfort”, while appeasing identity-based interests within the learning context, making the task of “speaking truth to power” more difficult.\textsuperscript{93} For Chomsky,\textsuperscript{94} western democracy once facilitated the academic-activism binary in which academics sought to make a difference. Consequently, activism was invariably “The political responsibility of intellectuals.”\textsuperscript{95}

\textbf{The Experience of Academic Activism}

We have identified three themes that may help our understanding of activism within the academy. Firstly, what we have termed geopolitical in which we recognise an all-encompassing layer related to the role of the academy within its geographical location, that is, Brazilian university’s wider role. Secondly, the epistemological which includes the theoretical orientation of the university or discipline which would include the use of teaching as activism. Lastly, intersectionality of disadvantage would include discussions regarding gender, social class, and ethnicity; and more broadly address questions about which who is able to attend university. This is particularly important, for instance,


\textsuperscript{91} Transpadini, 2021.


\textsuperscript{93} Weiner, 2020.


in countries like Brazil where there are no fees for state university attendance, but still challenge those from the working class to afford attendance due to the wider lack of adequate financial support. Importantly to note that while gender is discussed, its links to social class are sometimes given less consideration.

In considering the possibilities of activism within a neoliberal university, Hobson and Seabroke’s\textsuperscript{96} eIPE framework, highlights researchers’ opportunities to utilise agency in both fieldwork along with how they implement research impact in their respective disciplines. So too, pedagogic activism provides opportunities through the use and teaching of critical theory and methodology, the promotion of shifts to reflexive positionality, along with the new uptake of decolonisation of curriculum by universities in the north, provide opportunities for co-opted engagement by academics for genuine reflections. These positions enable the initiation of wider knowledge sharing within and between institutions, academic, and students which support the movement towards social and historical justice, for example, the return of plundered artefacts from Africa. Important too has been the struggle within a South African context of the links between decolonisation and efforts made to negate the impact of market and neoliberal ideology on universities.

\textbf{Case Study of Academic Activism Integrated into Praxis at UFES, Brazil}

Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo (UFES) is a public university in Brazil with strong academic activism experience related to some community outreach programs/projects. The Brazilian public university is based on three interrelated themes: teaching, research, and extension (community projects). The university is acknowledged as an important site of production, accumulation, and dissemination of knowledge in many Latin American contexts.\textsuperscript{97, 98} Traspadini argues that:

\begin{quote}
The role of social movements in bringing their praxis and socializing knowledge to the University, amidst the construction of a formal curriculum, presents varied meanings, […] In addition to assuming a formal curriculum, they play an organic role in the division of tasks, study, political construction inside and outside the university, and care for other workers from different areas.\textsuperscript{99}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{96} Hobson and Seabroke, 2007.
\textsuperscript{97} Transpadini, 2021.
\textsuperscript{98} Pereira, 2019.
\textsuperscript{99} Transpadini, 2021, 7.
University Extension services are interdisciplinary, educational, cultural, scientific, and political processes, through which interaction is promoted that transforms not only the university but also the social spaces with which it interacts. Extension services also imply academic practice, developed in conjunction with Teaching and Research, with a view to promoting and guaranteeing democratic values, equity, and the development of society in its human, ethical, economic, cultural, and social dimensions.

Extension services cannot be separated from academic practices of teaching and research. The University Extension is one of the social functions of the university, which aims to promote social development, foster extension projects and programs, training, and qualification courses for the public, as well as develop and support social and environmental projects, articulated for and with the community, considering popular knowledge and practices and the guarantee of democratic values of equal rights, respect for individuals, environmental and social sustainability.

Table 1: Data on the extension/community outreach programs and projects of Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo (UFES) – 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic areas</th>
<th>Total of community outreach</th>
<th>Total audience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Programs</td>
<td>Projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human rights and justice</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology and production</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>87</strong></td>
<td><strong>487</strong></td>
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Health, Education, technology, and human rights represent 77% of all programs and involve around 1,858,517 people. It is one of the most popular forms of academic activism. We present three academic activism programmes associated with community outreach programs (coordinated by professors, staff, and graduate students from UFES).

1. **Related to ethno-racial justice**: Núcleo de Estudos Afro-Brasileiros NEAB – (Center for Afro-Brazilian Studies) and Núcleo de Estudos e Pesquisas
Africanidades e Brasilidades (NAFRICAB) – Africanities and Brasilities Studies and Research Center. Both projects are involved with activism related to the community and refer to the issues of the black population, people of African descent, the development of policies for ethno-racial diversity, promotion of racial equality, and the enhancement of populations of African and Afro-Brazilian origin.

NEAB/UFES develops interdisciplinary activities, training courses for basic and higher education teachers, as well as academic and political meetings aiming to fight against racism and contribute to the effective application of Law 10.639/03, which determines the teaching in Brazilian education of Afro-Brazilian and African History and Culture in all levels. It currently consists of professors, researchers from the various Teaching Centers at UFES and from other universities in Brazil, students and external collaborators, masters with traditional knowledge, as well as representatives of forums, organized civil society, black entities, and black movements of Espírito Santo. NAFRICAB’s academic activism is also related to the action of thinking, discussing, and presenting ways for the implementation of Law 10.639/03 – integrating Black-Brazilian History and Culture into the formal curriculum.

2. Rural Education Undergraduate course – PROCAMPO is based on the National Curriculum Guidelines for Degree Courses recognised by the Brazilian Ministry of Education. The project is designed to train teachers with an ethical-professional attitude based on social responsibility with a view to enhance inclusivity, justice, and solidarity in society.

Training, research, and extension services emphasise and deepen understanding of rural education. This piece of work is closely linked to the emancipation of rural workers, humanisation of social relations, cooperatives, environment preservation, and culture with attendant complexities. The course provides an avenue to support social movements’ struggle for rural education as a right, in opposition to education linked to simple market logic.

As argued by the pedagogic project,

*The course is justified by the absence of specific training spaces for multidisciplinary teaching in line with the needs of curricular organization by areas of knowledge in rural schools, as well as by the need to build alternatives for organizing school and pedagogical work that allow for expansion of basic education in and of the field.*

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A regular undergraduate course forms the bedrock of the provision, focussing on the needs of the rural population. It is linked to practical projects developed or co-created by the workers and buttressed by academic activists who work inside universities, allowing this agenda to penetrate structured forms and content in the traditional Brazilian university institution.

3. The Open University to Senior Citizens program\textsuperscript{101} as an example of academic activism

The Open University for Senior Citizens Program is an ongoing program of university extension that established a regular relationship with the community of Vitória city (Espírito Santo/Brazil) focused on older people (60 years old and above). It is delivered by the Social Work Department at Espírito Santo Federal University (UFES/Brazil). A total of 150 older people are involved annually in the Open University for Senior Citizens, which promotes the autonomy and well-being of the older people using participatory and interactive educational approaches. The programme helps to promote life-long learning and decrease discrimination and violence. This program has contributed not only to enhancing the quality of life of participants but also to evidence-informed public policy relating to ageing, based on lived experiences. It also significantly contributes to the training of undergraduate and graduate students. The Open University Program for Senior Adult, UFES, is a consolidated program with wide visibility and impact in the local community. By taking responsibility for this program, the Department of Social Work plays a role in supporting the rapidly growing older population.

\textbf{New Forms of Activism}

Activism change is often associated with overt acts of resistance; however, this conception of change limits recognition of what activism can look like in the neoliberal university. Thus, we can observe agency in researchers’ fieldwork and research impact implementation in their disciplines; pedagogic activism through critical theory and methodology shifts to reflexive positionality. The new uptake of decolonisation of curriculum by universities in the north, can be co-opted by academics for genuine reflections, initiating knowledge sharing that leads to justice, for example, by calling out issues on artefacts from Africa, hidden genocides by colonialists, continuities of slave economic benefits in contemporary society, critical race relations, and the corporatisation of knowledge amongst a wide range of areas that require. Decolonisation itself is a movement with origins in South Africa seeking academic redress, critiquing

\textsuperscript{101} Maria das Graças wrote this abstract in 2014.
knowledge colonisation, and supporting academic equality, whose reach and scope is now much broader. Important too are the links between decolonisation and efforts made to negate impacts of the market and neoliberal ideology on universities. Within the UK anecdotal discussions with academic colleagues often bemoan the need for big moments in which activism, but this often minimises the significant work undertaken, often over years, to create opportunities for academic footholds and the scaffolding to support incremental or big-bang change. This highlights the importance of the “activismus”, a German word promoting active political engagement. Our experience was that within Nigeria, there were similarities with the experience of Brazilian colleagues in the past, but the military then had a key role in shattering collective activism within higher education, highlighting the importance of context.

Conclusion

We recognise that as academics we occupy both a privileged and intellectual role, which requires personal and institutional agency. More conservative macro neoliberal policies are changing society, students, and the Academy, with restricted budgets, inadequate space, and time to publish and a lack of recognition within the Academy about the broader contributions that are made to society. Thus, while individual academics gain respect due to their publications and research, the institutional context does not value other activist roles they might undertake. This demonstrates a contradiction of the institutional demand for funding, but this wider activism does not attract significant or possibly any funding or even being seen as a distraction from research or teaching. Public intellectuals must therefore use the contradictions and space that are created, leveraging the need to publish, raise funding, and utilise opportunities of these achievements to ensure wider engagement with social praxis. This raises the importance of individual agency, recognising that resistance will not always be overt and that we should recognise the importance of covert resistance due to the restrictions and shaping of the university and Academy.

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Consequently, spaces for resistance have may not have narrowed but are different, academics need to engage with existing space, exploit contradictions and use collaboration as a means to continue to adapt and alter the lenses through which we might try to identify activism. This is the role of our paper and that of the editorial team in engaging critically with this topic. So too we should remember that as intellectuals we are unable to control the outcomes of our activism, by which we mean how society and institutions react and enact a specific social process of change. However, as the old African proverb states, if we believe we are too small to make a difference we have never spent a night in a closed room with a mosquito.

References


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104 Bacon, 2014.


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